

THE SILENT FATHER IN ANDERSON'S

I WANT TO KNOW WHY

by John E. Parish

One character of major importance in Sherwood Anderson's *I Want to Know Why*—the father of the fifteen-year-old narrator—has been either ignored or seriously misjudged by critics who have published interpretations of the story over the past two decades. Furthermore, since the relationship between this father and son is a complex one, inaccurate evaluation of the father has prevented the critics from correctly analyzing the emotions which the boy has experienced and is now experiencing as he recalls his excursion to Saratoga.

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, though they discuss the story at length, have nothing whatever to say about the father in the first edition of *Understanding Fiction* (1943) and add nothing in the second (1959).¹ Similarly Irving Howe (1951) ignores him.² Simon O. Lesser (1955) believes that the son, his Oedipal tendencies aroused, has rejected his father and has been seeking in Jerry Tillford a father-surrogate, a man "better than his father—less fallible, more sympathetic with the boy's interests and, what is at first glance a curious requirement, devoid of sexuality":

That the unnamed narrator . . . wanted to adopt Jerry Tillford as a kind of second father could not be more clear. . . . His father is "all right," and evidently *extremely permissive* but he doesn't make much money and so can't buy his son things. The boy says he doesn't care—he's too old for that—but since he has just listed the kind of presents Henry Rieback is always getting from his father we doubt that statement. At a deeper level, we sense, the boy is disappointed because his father does not satisfy an immaterial need: he evidently does not share his son's interest in thoroughbreds and racing. Jerry Tillford, of course, is not only interested in these subjects but an authority upon them, and his job puts him in a position to befriend the boy in terms of his interests.³ [My italics]

Donald A. Ringe (1959) has a somewhat similar opinion, stating that

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in the narrator's eyes, "Henry Rieback's father is valued above his own because he has more money and can give more expensive presents."⁴

Both Lesser and Ringe, influenced by the resentment against his own father which Anderson exhibits in *A Story Teller's Story*, are erroneously attributing much the same attitude to the boy-narrator of *I Want to Know Why*. (An analogous prejudice would be to approach O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!* expecting to discover the attitudes and themes apparent in *Strange Interlude*.) *I Want to Know Why* is no part of the literature of revolt against illusions and is not concerned with repudiating sentimentality; it is curiously conventional in the values it upholds. Though they have thrown welcome light on other aspects of the story, the critics have overlooked one of Anderson's principal aims, which is to show hovering behind the sensitive adolescent an understanding father who loves his son deeply, observes him constantly—from a distance—and wisely says to his wife: "Let him alone." Anderson wholeheartedly endorses this quiet lawyer's philosophy of parental duty and expects his readers always to be aware of him and to admire him greatly. The lawyer is a character hardly less important to the story than the boy himself, who is, in fact, slowly growing into a man like his father.

Extremely permissive? Not if the phrase means imprudently indulgent. "Mother jawed and cried but Pop didn't say much." If the father is less anxious than the mother it is not because he is indifferent or ineffectual but because, having unobtrusively guided his son for fifteen years, he knows him well and has confidence in his good sense and basic integrity. The boy's infatuation with horses and racing is understandable to this parent, who must have lived through a similar passion in his own adolescence and knows that his son too will outgrow it. Unlike many parents of a later generation, he does not feel obligated to feign an enthusiasm equal to his son's; if he risks alienating the boy's affection, he accepts the risk as a duty. He is, one must admit, old-fashioned.

To infer from what the boy says about the father of Henry Rieback that he is disappointed with his own is completely to miss the point. When he says "My own father is a lawyer. He's all right," he is expressing—with natural masculine restraint—full approval; and when he adds "but [he] don't make much money and can't buy me things and anyway I'm getting so old now I don't expect it," he means exactly what he says. There may be some bravado in his voice but there is no resentment, and the tone is predominantly proud, sincere, manly. The reader must see that the father withholds gifts like bicycles and gold watches and Boy Scout uniforms (luxuries a generation ago which many parents allowed their sons to wait for), not because he cannot provide them, but because he does not need to purchase his son's respect, as does Rieback, and

because he is quietly training his son in self-reliance and other values sometimes dismissed as bourgeois. The narrator's statement that his father does not make much money has evidently been taken by the critics to mean that the lawyer is a failure in his profession, but the mature reader ought to hear in this comment echoes from his own childhood, when a father or mother trying to teach him how properly to value material possessions gave such a reason for not indulging a whim. What the father means, if the boy is quoting him, and what the boy in part understands, is that to gratify immediately a yearning for a bicycle or a gold watch or a Scout suit before the boy has learned its worth or worthlessness would be of doubtful wisdom.

This interpretation of the narrator's comparison of his father and the gambler is supported by the fact that when the four boys start out for Saratoga the narrator has thirty-seven dollars and Henry Rieback has eleven. The narrator has earned his money working nights and Saturdays in Enoch Meyer's grocery and has saved it; but the reader is shedding easy tears if he pities him as a child-laborer or indicts his father as improvident. The boy, who feels pride in his accomplishment rather than self-pity, mentally endorses his father's standard of values though, being a boy, naturally he cannot entirely keep from envying Henry the gifts which he has received in lieu of honest parental attention.

The narrator, of course, understands less than the reader should why his father "never said nothing against Henry" or Henry's father while the fathers of some of his friends were outspoken in their condemnation: "They said to their boys that money so come by is no good and they didn't want their boys brought up to hear gamblers' talk and be thinking about such things and maybe embrace them." The lawyer-father does not want to impose his own opinions on his son. He intends to let the boy form his own moral judgments, though in his own silent example he provides him with a reliable yardstick for measuring other men.⁵

There is proof that the boy has already begun to follow his father's example in this confident declaration: "If I wanted to be a gambler like Henry Rieback's father I could get rich. I know I could and Henry says so too. . . . That's what I would do if I wanted to be a gambler, but I don't." Here one sees irony in the use of the verb *know*. What the boy claims to know for a fact—that he can predict by intuition the outcome of a horse race—is to the reader an obvious untruth. What he claims not to know—in the title sentence and at other points in his story—is a knowledge which he is acquiring unconsciously over the years from the example of his quiet mentor but which he is so far only half willing to face: the knowledge that the men, black and white, who have elected to spend their lives around race tracks are fundamentally irresponsible and

inferior to men like his father. The father's wisdom in not forbidding his son to associate with Henry is evident here: the boy still feels the lure of the race tracks and still believes naively that he is endowed with a gift that could make him rich, but he has not been seduced by these attractions.

The disillusionment which the narrator experiences at the farmhouse is not the beginning of his moral development, as Ringe seems to believe⁶; it represents another hurdle of the sort that he has been clearing, one by one, over a number of years—a higher hurdle, certainly, but not an insuperable one. Anderson has made this incident the climax of the story and consequently it looms large, but he has prepared his reader for it by showing how both characters, father and son, have behaved on earlier occasions—occasions which, though briefly treated, should be recognized as episodes in the skillfully constructed plot.

Five years before the time of the story the boy stole one of his father's cigars and ate it, assured by an adult joker⁷ that this would stunt his growth and keep him small enough to qualify as a jockey. "It made me awful sick and the doctor had to be sent for, and then it did no good. I kept right on growing. It was a joke. When I told what I had done and why most fathers would have whipped me but mine didn't." Unquestionably Anderson intends for the reader to identify with the father at this point, as elsewhere, and to share all the mixed emotions which he prudently hides from his son: his pity for the nauseated ten-year-old, his amusement at the motive for eating the cigar, his fury at the gross prankster, his decision not to voice denial that "it was a joke" and not to punish his son for an act which has brought its own punishment. Although undoubtedly he shares the reader's opinion of the prank, the father never suggests that the boy might despise the prankster—for the same reason that he never utters criticism of the gambler. His son will not be able to maintain much longer his childish assumption that most adults are beyond reproach, but when he does begin to discriminate between admirable men and contemptible ones, he will base his judgments on his own experience and not on opinions his father has taught him to parrot. Brooks and Warren are right in saying that the narrator "has begun to question some of the accepted values and codes of the society in which he lives,"⁸ but his reaction is by no means what Lesser finds it to be, rejection of his father. The father's values and code are obviously superior to those which the boy is questioning.

Forced to give up the hope of becoming a jockey because he was going to be too big a man for such work, the narrator then allowed himself to dream for a while of becoming a stable hand instead. "But [I] had to give that up too. Mostly niggers do that work and I knew father wouldn't let me go into it. No use to ask him." While naturally he postpones final

surrender of his boyish dreams, unconsciously he has already accepted the fact that he is marked for a career similar to his father's. *Noblesse oblige*. He knows what he cannot put into words: that birth and position exclude him from the privilege of indulging his whims. Not without regret, but surely without rancor, he has become reconciled to a future more responsible than that of stable boy or rider or gambler. In context, this means that unlike Jerry Tillford, the arrested adolescent, the boy is reconciled to leaving childhood with its irresponsible pleasures and assuming the burdens of manhood. This is not a question to be argued with his father because he already knows what his father would think and in principle agrees with it.

It hardly needs saying that if, as the boy believes, his father has a low opinion of working around stables, it is not because such jobs are usually held by Negroes. The reader, identifying himself with the silent, gentlemanly lawyer, will see the professions of white jockeys and white gamblers as equally unsuitable for the intelligent youngster.

Brooks and Warren, in referring to the "mystical revelation" which the boy experiences in the scene at the paddock, apparently do not understand how entirely false is the boy's interpretation of what happens.⁹ In fact, they seem to believe with the boy that Jerry's feelings at the moment are identical with those of the narrator. ("Jerry Tillford, who had been capable of sharing the exaltation which the boy felt in the paddock, is also capable of the experience in the rummy farmhouse.") Lesser, too, states that "watching, he [the boy] experiences a mystical communion with the horse and the horse's trainer."¹⁰ But clearly the supposed "communion" between man and boy is as imaginary and as one-sided as that between the boy and the horse; Jerry, hardly conscious of the boy's presence, in no way reciprocates the love that the boy feels for him. Beyond any doubt what the narrator takes to be an apocalyptic vision is merely enchantment, the culminating moment of years of infatuation with horses and race tracks, and what he experiences a little later at the farmhouse is a breaking of the spell, a *disenchantment* symbolizing the critical step out of romantic childhood into realistic maturity.

The exaltation which the boy, but not the reader, mistakes for ecstatic revelation is too intense a state to have lasted long in any case. The boy is too sensitive, too decent, already too mature and too well schooled by his father in moral judgment to have been deceived very long about the real worth of Jerry Tillford. Early disillusionment was inevitable, even had it not been immediately precipitated by the discovery of Jerry in the brothel.

Anderson chooses carefully the words with which the narrator describes his brief infatuation with the trainer:

Something happened to me. I guess I loved that man as much as I did the horse. . . . I liked him that afternoon even more than I ever liked my own father. . . [And a little later] I was just lonesome to see Jerry, like wanting to see your own father at night when you are a young kid.

The boy is now recalling the experience with embarrassment and with some shame at having for a short while been disloyal to his father. As boys do, he distinguishes carefully between the verbs *love* and *like*. He is quite normal in hesitating to use the word *love* to designate the feeling he has for his father. When he says that he *likes* his father, just as when he says "He's all right," no discerning reader should be deceived by the understatement: to a boy like this any more fervent words would seem unmanly. In his vocabulary the verb *love* is cheap compared with the verb *like*; it will serve to describe the feeling he had for Jerry Tillford and for the horse, but the enduring affection and respect he has always had for his father is not something he cares to talk about. It is for a similar reason that all the boys buy souvenirs at Niagara Falls for their mothers and sisters but none for their fathers. In their world, a boy may indicate with gifts his toleration of the women of his family, but a gift presented to a father would embarrass both giver and receiver.

After the runaways get back home, "Mother jawed and cried but Pop didn't say much." And even now the father allows the boy to hike out every morning to the stables. Such lenience causes Lesser to label the father "extremely permissive," but the reader should see the good sense behind the apparent lack of concern.

The narrator can never tell his father about the distressing incident at Saratoga: "I told everything we done except one thing. I did and saw that alone. That's what I'm writing about. It got me upset. I think about it at night." It would be unfair, however, to infer from the boy's reticence that his old-fashioned father is a failure. It is doubtful that even less sensitive teen-agers today can discuss equivalent experiences—even with fathers who try to ignore the impossibility of perfect communion between adolescence and middle age, and claim to be just like older brothers to their sons. A great part of Anderson's success is that he has so well portrayed the inescapable loneliness of adolescent crises. One may pity the boy who says "I did and saw that alone" and still not mistake as unfeeling the man whose characteristic remark is "Let him alone"—*the only speech in the story, by the way, which Sherwood Anderson and his boy-narrator enclose in quotation marks.*

The critics have noted with admiration that the scene at the farmhouse has been set as a parallel to that at the paddock.¹¹ There is a deliberate paralleling of two other passages (lyrical rather than narrative) which deserves equal praise, as does Anderson's unerring use of tense in both

passages. The narrator speaks in the present when describing his adolescent response to the morning atmosphere around the race tracks:

Well, out of the stables they come and the boys are on their backs and it's lovely to be there. You hunch down on top of the fence and itch inside you. Over in the sheds the niggers giggle and sing. Bacon is being fried and coffee made. Everything smells lovely. Nothing smells better than coffee and manure and horses and niggers and bacon frying and pipes being smoked out of doors on a morning like that. It just gets you, that's what it does.¹²

That this exhilaration is, however, already a thing of the past, a response which has been irrecoverably lost, is emphasized by the companion passage at the end of the story:

Spring has come again and I'm nearly sixteen and go to the tracks mornings same as always. . . . But things are different. At the tracks the air don't taste as good or smell as good. . . . I keep thinking about it [the shock experienced at the farmhouse] and it spoils looking at horses and smelling things and hearing niggers laugh and everything. Sometimes I'm so mad about it I want to fight someone. . . . I want to know why.

To employ past tense in the first of these passages would steal thunder from the climactic scene at the farmhouse and rob the narrative of its immediacy. Because the present *is* used, the reader accompanies the youngster through the several stages of his critical adventure, and much of the atmosphere is preserved of the dream world from which he has almost completely emerged by the time he tells his story. Much the same purpose is served by allowing the narrator, even after his disillusioning shock, to retain his naive conviction that he has a supernatural gift for recognizing a winning horse by a lump that rises in his throat and that he could, if he chose, use this intuition to make himself rich. The boy is still trailing clouds of glory.

Donald Ringe finds nothing to admire in the boy before his experience at Saratoga, believing that he is (1) completely self-centered and (2) "a prisoner of his own five senses" or "a creature whose primary concern is with selfish sensuous gratification." According to Ringe, with the "pure love" that the boy achieves for Jerry in the scene at the paddock, he "turns his back upon the immature self-centeredness that has heretofore guided his life"; and the disillusionment which occurs at the farmhouse, turning that love into hate, "releases him from his bondage" to his senses. *After* these two developments Ringe sees hope for moral growth.¹³ But Anderson has shown the narrator's moral development well under way before the excursion to Saratoga, and he depicts the inevitable dulling of childhood's acute sensations as a loss—the loss of what Wordsworth calls "the vision splendid" of Nature's priesthood, or infancy. What Ringe interprets as an escape from prison Anderson, with Wordsworth, represents as "shades of

the prison house" beginning to close upon the growing boy. He recognizes with regret that

The youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

Probably no American who attended high school in the 1890's could have escaped reading Wordsworth's most celebrated ode. Without assuming that Anderson had the poem in mind when he wrote *I Want to Know Why*, however, one can enjoy comparing the disenchantment that the boy describes in the second passage quoted above ("Spring has come again . . .") with the nostalgia described in these lines:

The rainbow comes and goes
And lovely is the rose;
The moon doth with delight
Look round her when the heavens are bare;
Waters on a starry night
Are beautiful and fair;
The sunshine is a glorious birth;
But yet I know, where'er I go,
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

And what the wise father—who knows his own son—hopes that the boy will eventually be able to affirm is something like this:

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now forever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will not grieve, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

NOTES

1. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Fiction*, Second Edition, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959, pp. 324-330. The editors comment further on *I Want to Know Why* in the Appendix, pp. 647-661 *passim*.
2. Irving Howe, *Sherwood Anderson*, New York, William Sloane Associates, 1951, pp. 154-157.

3. Simon O. Lesser, "The Image of the Father: A Reading of 'My Kinsman, Major Molyneux' and 'I Want to Know Why,'" *Partisan Review*, XXII (Summer 1955), 372-390.
4. Donald A. Ringe, "Point of View and Theme in 'I Want to Know Why,'" *Critique*, III, No. 1 (Spring-Fall 1959), 24-29.
5. The father's philosophy resembles that expressed by Milton in *Areopagitica*: "It was from out the rind of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evil, as two twins cleaving together, leaped forth into the world. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say of knowing good by evil. . . . He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where the immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat."
6. "Point of View and Theme in 'I Want to Know Why,'" pp. 28-29.
7. Harry Hellinfinger, the prankster, reminds one of the contemptible Jim Kendall in Ring Lardner's *Haircut*.
8. *Understanding Fiction*, p. 325.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 326-327.
10. "The Image of the Father," p. 382.
11. Lesser's startling Freudian psychoanalysis of the boy and his subconscious reactions to the two contrasted scenes ("The Image of the Father," pp. 388-390) is well worth reading, but in my opinion Anderson cannot have intended the symbolism Lesser finds in the parallel passages.
12. Mark Twain's influence is evident in this passage, which recalls such lines as these from the nineteenth chapter of *Huckleberry Finn*:

"Sometimes we'd have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time. Yonder was the banks and the islands, across the water; and maybe a spark—which was a candle in a cabin window; and sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two—on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming over from one of them crafts. It's lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened."
13. "Point of View and Theme in 'I Want to Know Why,'" pp. 24-29.